

Social media as facilitator – a cultural and sociolinguistic analysis of hate speech discourse and performance in Japan

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Abstract

The last decade saw an increase in debate around hate speech in Japan and the introduction of new laws. In order to better understand hate speech discourse and performance in Japan this paper gives an overview of some historical and current socioeconomic trends in the country before providing a detailed analysis of the relationship between hate groups and target groups. As a case study, the right-wing organization *Zaitokukai* is introduced and its discourse investigated using data from a debate between its former leader and the former Mayor of Osaka. Through the application of performance theory it was found that social media and streaming sites such as YouTube play a role in staging the discussion of hate speech in the Japanese context, thus allowing it to reach a wider audience, and that social media also serve as a facilitator for hate speech on a street level.

Keywords: hate speech in Japan, *zainichi* Koreans, *Zaitokukai*, performance theory, YouTube

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper will give a cultural and sociolinguistic overview of hate speech in Japan, and subsequently position hate speech online and in social media in a broader context. Historical and current trends in discourse and the interaction between hate groups and target groups will be introduced to show how social media is used to organize and stage hate speech, thus serving as a facilitator.

If we accept that hate speech is communication, then we can easily use any elementary model of communication to identify the hate group, message, target group, context (such as medium, place, culture and religion), as well as potential feedback. This is a preliminary and valuable step towards better understanding the dynamics of instances of hate speech. Furthermore, once such variables have been established, it becomes possible to compare instances of hate speech. For example, Japanese instances of hate speech have different messages and target groups than hate speech in other countries, and moreover, the culture and context will be different.

Recent research on hate speech in Japan has mostly focused on the definition and framing of hate speech with the purpose of promoting understanding of this concept, one that remains a recent social and juridical term in the country (Norikoenet 2014, Ryang 2016). This chapter will apply performance theory, first advocated by Goffman (1956), to the analysis of the behaviour of the most central stakeholders in Japanese hate speech discourse, thus contributing to a better understanding of how stakeholders behave and why they do so.

2 CURRENT JAPANESE SOCIETY

Japan prides itself on being an island country (*shimaguni*), and while being an island country is not a good indicator of the amount of contact with other nation states, it is safe to characterize Japan as a developed country with a homogeneous population. Fearon (2003) puts Japan third to last on a world ranking of ethnic and cultural diversity by country, only surpassed by South Korea and North Korea. It is worth pointing out, however, that 16 years has passed since Fearon published his survey, and there has been a steep increase in immigration within this span. According to data from the *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2018* (Statistics Bureau Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Japan 2018), 1 in 30 marriages is now between a Japanese national and a non-Japanese national.

Furthermore, while Japan is known for its strict immigration laws these have been eased to allow for the immigration needed to compensate for labour shortages

due to a dwindling birth rate. The crude birth rate of Japan in 2018 was 7.50 per 1000 people, 223rd of 226 territories (CIA 2018). An OECD report from 2017 puts Japan at the top of countries with skills shortages. Over 80% of Japanese firms with over ten employees report having difficulties filling jobs, compared to 40% of firms in the United States and 20% of those in France (OECD 2017).

3 DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF HATE SPEECH IN JAPANESE CONTEXTS

A low birth rate, combined with strict immigration laws, have led to labour shortages in every sector. It is therefore possible to hypothesize that Japanese people are more likely to become engaged in hate speech in Japan because they have fallen out of society socially, and therefore seek somewhere to belong, rather than feeling a rage towards immigrants taking up jobs or using the welfare system. Ito (2014, 439) supports this possibility:

Under decades of economic depression and neoliberal reform, people tend to feel that they are “vulnerable” in society, and that government would not care about individuals. More and more people would think that they are “abandoned” from society. Current anti-Korean sentiment coincides with such socioeconomic context where “human rights” sounds somewhat “empty”.

Another distinctive characteristic of hate speech in Japan has to do with its peculiar and often misunderstood religious situation. The native religion of Japan, the all-pervasive Shintoism, coexists with other religions; two out of three weddings in Japan are Christian, and 85% of all funerals are Buddhist (Hendry 2013). Hate speech in Japan is therefore prone to deal with ethnicity rather than religion or dogmas (e.g. sexual orientation). The premise for hate speech in Japan is that it is primarily racial and politically motivated, catalysed by social changes.

4 DISCRIMINATION AND TARGET GROUPS IN MODERN JAPAN

Although the concept of hate speech and its Japanese form, *heito supiiichi*, is a recent addition to the public sphere in Japan, certain groups have been marginalized over a long period of time. In particular, the discrimination of three different groups in Japan has been well documented; the *burakumin* outcast group,

foreigners (stereotypically “Westerners”), and *zainichi* Koreans and Chinese (special permanent residents).

Burakumin literally means “hamlet people”, and refers to previous outcast communities in Japan. These communities have traditionally been linked to certain professions considered to be impure (Hankins 2014). Partially because of its taboo label, and partially because of a common belief that the problem of discrimination has already been resolved, the *burakumin* are hardly mentioned in the media anymore, and it is difficult to say anything about the extent of discrimination or hate speech towards them in contemporary Japan. However, the author has in fact come across several people in Japan mentioning the *burakumin* in relationship to certain areas or family names.

Secondly, incidents of foreign nationals reporting being treated in a discriminatory fashion in Japan have been, and still are written about in the news. The most thorough investigation in book form is probably Aradou (2004), with its in-depth look at the Otaru hot springs case. It was reported that several bath houses in the hot spring town of Otaru on the island of Hokkaido had denied foreigners access. Moreover, in 2014 the soccer club Urawa Reds was fined because one of its supporters’ groups had denied foreigners access to the stands and put up discriminating banners (Orlowitz 2014). These and similar cases seem to be characterized by a fear or concern among some Japanese that foreigners will not be able to understand or respect Japanese customs or manners.

The third group, the so-called *zainichi* Koreans and *zainichi* Chinese form a sharp contrast to the potentially rule-breaking Western looking foreigners, as they are practically Japanese in appearance, name and culture, yet have become the prime target for hate speech in contemporary Japan. The word *zainichi* is made up of the two characters meaning ‘stay’ and ‘Japan’, and refers to residents in Japan with ‘special permanent resident’ status (*tokubetsueijusha*). The Japanese Ministry of Justice also publishes detailed statistics on foreign nationals and their status. In 2015 there were 311,463 Koreans in Japan with special permanent resident status, down from 385,232 in 2010. Lee (2012, 1) explains the *zainichi* Korean’s special position in Japan as follows:

[They are] descendants of colonial-era migrants from the southern Korean peninsula during the first half of the twentieth century. It is in fact not always obvious who belongs to the *zainichi* Korean collective. They appear indistinguishable from the Japanese, and their cultural literacy, use of Japanese pass names, and native fluency in Japanese allows “passing” as a way of life, making them an invisible postcolonial community. Despite the community’s high degree of social and cultural assimilation to Japanese society, *zainichi* Koreans are legally marginalized and treated as foreign residents. Although over 80 percent of *zainichi* Koreans were born in Japan,

and the current demographics include highly assimilated second, third and fourth generations, they are categorized as foreign residents unless they go through the strict process of naturalization.

A substantial body of fieldwork and biographies gives a thorough picture of the lives of many *zainichi* Koreans (Lee 2012, Brown 2015, Cho 2016) who, even though they have lived and worked in Japan all their lives, choose not to become fully naturalized Japanese nationals.

For a thorough historical account of discrimination, hate speech and sentiment toward marginalized groups in Japan, including the three groups mentioned in this section, from a journalist/writer's perspective in Japanese, please refer to Yasuda (2015).

5 HATE SPEECH IN CURRENT JAPANESE SOCIETY

Although hate speech can certainly be covert, it is natural to start the investigation of hate speech within a confined culture or country with the kind that is visible and overt, and receives attention through outlets like the media or courts. According to Martin (2018) strong appeals for hate speech laws in Japan began in 2012 due to an increase in anti-Korean rallies and demonstrations, especially by protest groups such as the *Zaitokukai*, short for *Zainichi Tokken o Yurusanai Shimin no Kai*, literally meaning “citizens’ group that does not forgive special rights for Korean residents of Japan”. On the motivations behind such rallies, Martin (2018, 460-461) notes:

A combination of North Korean nuclear weapons ambitions, territorial disputes over uninhabited islands with South Korea, and the ongoing friction over how to resolve the Japanese wartime sex-slave issue (euphemistically referred to in Japan as the “Comfort Women” issue), increased tensions between Japan and the Koreans. This, in turn, inflamed attitudes towards the Korean-Japanese community.

In other words, frustration over political tensions between Japan and Korea seems to have been taken out on the *zainichi* Korean group.

This political activity led to the first ordinance against hate speech being passed in the Osaka Assembly January 2016 (the Japan Times 2016). Osaka is the centre of the Kansai region, historically housing many *burakumin* as well as *zainichi* Koreans and Chinese, as well as being a stronghold of the *Zaitokukai*. This was later followed up by the “Act on the Promotion of Efforts to Eliminate Unfair Discriminatory Speech and Behavior against Persons Originating from

Outside Japan” in June the same year, with the first court order of compensation to a *zainichi* Korean September 2016 over defamation by the *Zaitokukai* (the Mainichi 2016).

6 ORGANIZATION AND ACTIVITIES OF THE *ZAITOKUKAI* ONLINE AND OFFLINE

We have thus established a primary target group for hate speech in Japan, the *zainichi* Koreans, and we have an organized group punished for hate speech, the *Zaitokukai*, that we now examine more in detail. The *Zaitokukai* is a nationalist, far-right political organization established and previously led by Makoto Sakurai, with the claim of 16,399 members on their website zaitokukai.info in June 2017. That website has now been offline for some time, but a new, smaller website, containing the rules and stipulations of the *Zaitokukai* and a blog by the new leader, was accessible at the time this chapter was submitted in August 2019. Makoto Sakurai is currently running another site called *Koudou Suru Hoshuu Undou*, which literally translates into “Act – Conservation Movement”, advertising much of the same activities as the original *Zaitokukai* site.

The original *Zaitokukai* website in June 2017 featured on its front page a picture of a cartoon character wearing a white head band with a red sun, options for signing up and giving donations, a news feed, an explanation of the purpose the *Zaitokukai*, a link to a ready to print poster of the “four pillars” of the *Zaitokukai*, and an event calendar. These four pillars are the “special permanent resident permit” (*tokubetsu eijuu shikaku*), “subsidization of (North) Korean schools in Japan” (*Chosen gakkou hojyou koufu*), “welfare benefit preferential treatment” (*seikatu hogo yuuguu*), and “alias dispensation” (*tsuumei seido*).

The event calendar lists upcoming rallies and demonstrations. Clicking on an entry leads to detailed information on the topic, time, meeting place, contact details (including the name of the person in charge), requests to bring flags and nationalistic symbols (e.g. the rising sun flag, used by the Imperial Japanese Navy), calls to avoid wearing national costumes of other countries than Japan, calls not to bring dangerous objects, and suggestions for paroles.

These paroles are primarily about political and economic policies, but at the street level and in social media calls for target groups to “return home” can be found, while derogatory comments are frequent. The visual aspects of such rallies and counter-demonstration by antifa-groups are well documented by Akiyama (2015). Speaking from the experience of the author, the antifa-groups appear

well organized. The same slogans printed in similar fonts appear repeatedly, including calls to stop racism, framing *Zaitokukai*-activities as hate speech, and even requests for racists to go home. The antifa-groups very often outnumber the original demonstrators.

Thus, the *Zaitokukai* webpage, and its social media functions, are not a medium of hate speech in itself, but rather a facilitator of hate speech, especially at street level, but also potentially for private individuals to use on social media on their own.

7 HATE SPEECH INTERACTION AND DISCOURSE

It is fortunate for the investigation presented in this chapter that footage is available from a debate about hate speech in front of the press in the Osaka City Hall from 10th of October 2014, between the leader of the *Zaitokukai*, Makoto Sakurai, and Touru Hashimoto, a lawyer and at the time Mayor of Osaka. This unlikely event came about during the peak of the clashes between the *Zaitokukai* and the antifa-groups, and it also received attention in the international media. An analysis of this incident, which a *Guardian* journalist described as a “show down” which descended into a “slanging match” (McCurry 2014), offers a unique chance to isolate aspects of the discourse on hate speech in Japan and its bipolarity. Figure 1 shows a summary of the course of events transcribed by the author. The timeline indicated is approximate, but is easily verifiable on streaming sites along with the contents. A complete transcription in Japanese of the debate and Sakurai’s monologue to the press can be found in Logmi (2014).

To sum up the main events of the debate, the former Mayor of Osaka, Touru Hashimoto’s main point is that the *Zaitokukai* should stop hate speech in Osaka, and that any dissatisfaction with the current system should be addressed through the appropriate democratic channels, like Congress or the court. On the other hand, Sakurai denies spreading hate speech and considers his own utterances to be unproblematic. He disagrees with the rights of the *zainichi* Koreans in Japan, and talks in negative terms about Korea because he believes that Koreans talk badly about Japan. He also claims that he is merely expressing his right to have an opinion, claiming that Hashimoto is trying to deny him his democratic right to freedom of speech.

Content wise there is little constructive dialogue, and no sign of agreement or solution. Rather, the debate functions as a stage for a duel with name-calling and attempts to frame the opponent as bad. This discourse structure is of a kind that is especially suitable for dissemination on social media. Altogether,

the various versions of videos of the debate had over 8 million views on streaming sites as of February 2020. A detailed linguistic analysis of the discourse is provided in the next section.

-12.00	Sakurai has arrived early and starts talking to the press alone.
-11.50	Sakurai says that he is critical of the way that the press work, and expresses dissatisfaction about being taped earlier that day without permission.
-11.00	Sakurai names several newspapers and television stations, and voices criticism about what they report, and asks them rhetorically why they have come.
-8.00	Sakurai criticizes the media for not reporting the truth about Koreans.
-5.00	The debate is about to start and the rules are being read. This is a one-on-one “exchange of opinions” (<i>iken koukan</i>). No questions are allowed.
-4.00	Sakurai leaves a copy of his book on Hashimoto’s table, but it is returned. It is then shown to the press and displayed on Sakurai’s table.
0.00	Hashimoto enters the room, and the debate starts. Hashimoto invites Sakurai to have the first word.
0.15	Sakurai says he wants to ask Hashimoto about hate speech. Hashimoto answers and a debate arises on what constitutes hate speech.
0.30	The debate moves on to the topic of what kind of statements about people of certain nationalities should be allowed.
0.50	An argument breaks out and they both stand up for a while.
1.30	The debate recommences, and Hashimoto says that if Sakurai has any issues with the current political and social system, he should take it to the Congress, instead of bullying minorities. Sakurai says he is not interested in politics.
4.00	Hashimoto urges Sakurai to use the appropriate channels of democracy. Sakurai answers that he is in fact obeying the rules of democracy, and claims that Hashimoto is trying to deny him his democratic rights.
4.40	Hashimoto says that Osaka has no need for racists. Sakurai denies being a racist.
5.40	Hashimoto again urges Sakurai to use appropriate political channels, and to keep any statements within the law.
5.30	Sakurai says that the <i>Zaitokukai</i> ’s rallies are peaceful.
5.50	Hashimoto gives examples of hate speech utterances directed to Koreans in the past, and asks Sakurai to stop making such utterances.
6.30	No new arguments are being made, and Hashimoto wants to end the debate.
7.00	Heated words are being exchanged and Hashimoto leaves the room.
7.10	Sakurai turns to the press, and says, as you can see Hashimoto ran away.
7.30	Sakurai wants to continue to talk to the press alone, but is asked to leave the room by the organizers.

Figure 1: Summary of events in the debate between former Mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto and former *Zaitokukai* leader Makoto Sakurai.

8 METHODOLOGY: HATE SPEECH DISCOURSE AS PERFORMANCE AND SOCIAL MEDIA AS A STAGE

The various recordings of this debate available on streaming sites such as YouTube, with meta-information and commentary, demonstrate how social media play a role in staging discussions of hate speech in the Japanese context, and enabling them to reach a wider audience. This section will introduce methodology from performance theory, and analyse some concrete examples of how the two participants mentioned in the previous section present themselves and the other, and how they utilize the public stage given to them.

Hate speech inherently consists of words. But by saying something we are also doing something, as proposed in Austin's speech act theory (1962), and in this way the performance aspect is also a component of hate speech that should not be overlooked. This chapter will thus put special emphasis on this performance aspect in the analysis of hate speech discourse.

Firstly, it is necessary to establish what is meant by the term performance. Performance theory includes a wide array of potential study subjects. As Schechner (1988, xvii) elaborates,

Performance is an inclusive term. Theater is only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotions, family scenes, and so on – through to play, sports, theater, dance, ceremonies, and performances of great magnitude.

The principal methodology of the sociologist Erving Goffman is to use everyday concepts such as performance as a gateway to analysing and understanding human behaviour and interaction. He begins his chapter on performance in his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* by stating, “When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests the observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (1956, 17). Hashimoto as a young, successful, but unorthodox mayor requests through his social media performance to be taken seriously as a politician. Sakurai, as an organizer and spokesperson of a right-wing group requests that his ideas and actions should be taken seriously, and that through social media they should reach a wide audience. Through the interaction one cannot help getting the impression that they are talking across each other instead of together, and although they are performing before the same audience, they are appealing to completely different ones.

Hashimoto and Sakurai have conflicting opinions, and as such represent two different fronts. According to Goffman (1956, 22-30), the front of a performer can be

divided into three different parts, namely setting, appearance and manner. It is worth noting that Sakurai utilizes the setting to give his opinion on the media before the debate, as seen in the quotes below, and to discredit his opponent after the debate.

- (1) “You should be ashamed. What about you, Kyodo News? You write bad things about the *Zaitokukai* all the time. You can criticize us, but in that case, what are you doing here? Go home!” (-9.40)
- (2) “Where is Mainichi *Shimbun* (newspaper)? Is the perverted Mainichi *Shinbun* here? Do you remember the *waiwai*-incident? You wrote that Japanese are sex-maniacs in your English edition. Stop publishing hate articles!” (-9.20)

Sakurai voices his dissatisfaction with the mainstream media, and offers an alternative view on what hate speech is. These divergent attitudes are also fronted in the actual debate:

- (3) S: “You brought up the issue of hate speech.”
 H: “In Osaka. I have told you to stop making those statements in Osaka.”
 S: “I’m asking you, what kind of statements?”
 H: “Statements bracketing certain people or nationalities together, and then making value judgments.”
 S: “So, you’re saying I’m not allowed to criticize Koreans?”
 H: “You.” (*omae*)
 S: “Don’t call me *omae!*” (0.20)

Sakurai in his appearance does not see anything wrong with making these kinds of statements, and later in the debate reinforces the argument that he is allowed to have an opinion:

- (4) S: “Saying, Koreans go back to the Korean Peninsula, is one opinion, isn’t it?”
 H: “Stop it, bracketing people together!”
 S: “You (*Omae*), Stop renouncing democracy! Stop renouncing freedom of speech!” (6.00)

Another central component of Goffman’s discussion of performance is “the popular view that the individual offers his performance and puts on his show ‘for the benefit of other people’” (1954, 17). Sakurai believes that he is acting in the best interests of Japan, as evident from the following passage:

- (5) “My wish is only to make Japan better, also, if someone uses abusive language about Japan or does something disrespectful, isn’t it only natural that I get upset?” (6.30)

Hashimoto, as well, also claims that he is acting in the best interests of people in Osaka and Japan:

- (6) “At any hand, we don’t need activities like yours (*omae*) in Osaka, so put forward your claims to the Diet...” (5.20).

Thus, for the benefit of people, both participants claim they are acting to protect the people and treasure democracy, although but with completely different meanings behind these acts.

In terms of the last component of the two men’s respective fronts and manner, the use of the second person pronoun *omae* causes friction between the participants as seen in excerpts (3), (4) and (6) above. *Omae* is an informal pronoun, and second person pronouns are generally avoided with strangers, people of higher status, and people of out-groups (*soto*), and replaced with honorifics. *Omae* thus possibly takes on an emphatic, threatening or disrespectful function in this exchange. It is also striking and unique for an event with public officials that plain forms are used throughout the debate instead of polite ones, which would be conventional between two people who do not know each other well. Such diverging representations of the self and other are undeniably performances that will gain support for each participant’s views in their respective camps, but not very constructive when it comes to finding solutions to the underlining issues.

9 THE JAPANESE CONTEXT

The label “hate speech” in Japan has until now mostly been used for anti-*zainichi* Korean discourse, possibly only encompassing a part of all potential hate speech. Martin (2018, 461-462) states the following on the extent of staged instances of hate speech in Japan:

The first ever government study of the issue in 2015 found that there were 347 protests and demonstrations in 2013, and a total of close to 1,200 between April 2012 and September 2015. This is likely a conservative estimate, and the number of instances of lower levels or more individual forms of hate speech is likely several multiples of this number.

The reason why hate speech targeted at *zainichi* Koreans is particularly visible in Japan is most likely that Korea has territorial and historical disputes with Japan (e.g. the so-called “comfort women” issue), and that Japan is frequently targeted in staged demonstrations in Korea. In terms of hate speech in Japan however, thematically it seems to avoid touching upon these disputes, and instead focusing

on minorities' performativity in Japan, that is to say the minorities' political and economic rights, and their clashes with Japanese law.

10 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Hate speech comes in many forms, both in terms of linguistic content and context. These two correlate in that hate speech from political organizations and other organized groups is well-organized and tend to centre around publicized covert racism, whereas at the other end of the spectrum hate speech in computer mediated communication (CMC) is often anonymous, disarrayed, derogatory and direct. A scale going from overtness to covertness is shown in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2: Representation of scale showing the relationship between hate speech sender and hate speech content.

Organized hate speech will always try to balance itself on the line of what is considered to be legal and what falls under freedom of speech.

In a Japanese context, it was shown in this chapter that hate groups in Japan have heavily organized structures and that for these organizations online media in Japan mainly serve as a facilitator of hate speech rather than being a medium for hate speech in itself. Hate speech in Japan can obviously be defined by its content, but it is clear that certain types of activities and discourses also become hate speech through their performativity (Goffman 1956, Butler 1990). For most performances in Japan that can be considered hate speech, there are usually groups or individuals nearby stating that what is being staged is hate speech (Ito 2014, Akiyama 2015), and thus clearly marking it as such.

Hate speech is correlated to a chain reaction of historical and contemporary events, and it is not always the racism in the messages but rather the hate speech and politics as a performance, including the senders, receivers and the targets of the messages, which propels this chain reaction. Stopping such chain reactions is possible by first understanding the different variables included in communication, and based on this systematic knowledge, implementing the measures necessary to prevent them.

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